Rules of the Game
Reading Spell Descriptions (Part Seven)
By Skip Williams

This week, we'll conclude our discussion of spells with a look at descriptive text for spells and at spell chains.

Descriptive Text

After the spell header are one or more paragraphs of text that supplements the information in the spell header. Description text gives details such as how much damage the spell deals, what effect the spell has on the recipient, or other information about how the spell functions.

No hard and fast rules exist for interpreting the information found in a spell's descriptive text, but take a look at a few tips:

- The header takes precedence: None of the information in a spell's descriptive text is intended to contradict what's shown in the spell header, though it often helps modify it in some way.

- Descriptive text usually doesn't bother saying what the spell does not do: The list of things a spell can't do is theoretically endless, so the spell description usually doesn't even attempt to do so. Instead, the descriptive text tries to explain what the spell does as succinctly as possible. If you don't find something in a spell's descriptive text, it's a pretty good bet the spell doesn't do it.

- Descriptive text usually doesn't consider the effects of saving throws, spell resistance, or creature immunities: As noted in Part Six, most spell descriptions are written with the assumption that the recipient's saving throw against the spell (if one is allowed) fails. Likewise, the spell description doesn't bother to remind you that the spell won't work on recipients that are immune to it. For example, the *fireball* description doesn't tell you that the spell won't damage things that are immune to fire. You're expected to figure that out for yourself when you note the spell's fire descriptor.

- Descriptive text is meant to be considered as a whole: The easiest way to completely misunderstand what a spell does is to focus on one part of the descriptive text to the exclusion on the rest of the text. This can prove easy to do when the descriptive text is long or complex.

For example, the *spiritual weapon* spell seems straightforward at first; the spell creates a force weapon that you use to bash your foes. Simple, right? Well, not quite, as the sheer length of the descriptive text (more than a third of a page) attests. Some folks, however, stumble over the last sentence in the first paragraph, which says that the weapon returns to you and hovers when you're not directing it. If you don't consider what the rest of the descriptive text says, you might conclude that you must use an action each round to make the weapon attack. If you did, however, you'd be wrong. The second paragraph of the descriptive text explains that once you select a target, the weapon attacks the previous round's target. So long as the previous round's target is in range in and in your line of sight, the weapon is "directed" without any action from you.

Spell Chains

A group of spells, all at different levels, that resemble each other in terms of their effects or results constitute a spell chain. In general, only the lowest level spell in a spell chain will have a full description, with a complete header and complete descriptive text. The higher-level spells in the chain have incomplete descriptions that contain only those elements that differ from the spell at the beginning of the chain.

It's usually pretty easy to note when a spell is part of a chain, because the spell will have a name the includes the words "greater" or "lesser" or the spell name gives some other hint that it's part of a chain (the various *cure* spells, for example, which all contain "cure" and go from "minor" to "critical" and then begin adding "mass"). Spells that are part of a chain often have incomplete headers and very short bits of descriptive text. Headers, for example, usually only contain entries that make the spell different from other spells in the chain. To get a full picture of what the spell does, you have to flip back to the base spell in the chain. (The spell's descriptive text tells you the spell to reference.)

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has just completed an18-year run as the Sage of *Dragon* *Magazine*. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden. (Rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends.)

Visit our website at www.wizards.com/dnd